

We're bored. Not all of us, and certainly not all the time, but it does happen a lot. Look into the eyes of the person behind the checkout counter the next time you buy something. Note the expression on the face of an employee in accounts payable who has held that same job for ten years. Observe a classroom of students during a middle school world studies class. Boredom is everywhere, and it's a by-product of poorly structured systems.

In so many communities and organizations, the lack of interesting and challenging opportunities is apparent. Teenagers with excess free time and hungry minds are forced to choose from a scant menu of options, often resorting to mindless forms of entertainment to pass the time. Adults in the workplace aren't much better off, but the demands of work and family life keep us busy enough to be complacent with the status quo.

Whether the fault lies with the systems that surround us or the way we're approaching them, boredom isn't the only thing holding us back. It's part of a larger trend of issues preventing us from realizing our potential. Some of us suffer from a lack of motivation. Others have problems with follow-through—eagerly starting new projects with verve only to lose steam over time. Still others feel helpless even to try, discouraged by the apparent difficulty of what lies ahead.

These feelings are all common among people who have

become disenchanted with “the system,” whether that system is their company, their school, or even their personal life. Examining these issues and how they relate to each other, I’ve grouped them into two distinct symptoms: lack of *volition* and lack of *faculty*. By understanding how they inhibit us, we can attack them head on. Let’s take a closer look.

Lack of Volition. Volition is the *will* to do something; the motivation and internal drive to see it through. Any kind of proactive or ambitious behavior is evidence of strong volition. People who lack volition feel lost, bored, or disconnected from the task at hand. They can’t see why an activity or behavior is worthwhile. A lack of volition is defined by disinterest, low involvement, and arrested development. An individual lacking volition says, “I’m not going to do that. Why would I? What’s in it for me?”

Lack of Faculty. Faculty is the belief that we have the skills and tools to handle the challenges we’re facing; that we know how to begin and have the confidence to pursue our goals. People who lack faculty in a particular situation may feel that it’s too hard, or that it’s unclear what they need to do to succeed. A lack of faculty is defined by anxiety, submission, and ultimately, despair. An individual lacking faculty says, “I can’t do this. I’m not prepared. I don’t know how.”

We can’t bribe our way out of these issues. But that’s exactly what we try to do. Faced with an unmotivated employee or student, our first instinct is to dangle a carrot (an incentive). If that doesn’t work, we threaten him. In either case, we’re missing the point. Tackling a lack of volition or faculty with blunt instruments like rewards and punishments simply ignores the fact that *the activities and experiences causing these symptoms aren’t any fun.*

The Proof Is in the Pudding

Fortunately for us, one medium is designed to address these issues systemically: games. They do this through a structured and challenging system that makes the process of learning rewarding, enables deep engagement, provides a sense of autonomy, and asks us to be heroes in our own stories.

Games, in contrast to shallow rewards systems, are made up of activities that we genuinely like. They manage to pull us in and hold our attention almost effortlessly. This is no accident. Games are created with our enjoyment in mind. Josh Knowles, a software developer and designer, drives this point home on his website: “Games are engagement engines. To design a game is to take some thing—some basic enjoyable and/or satisfying interaction—and carefully apply rules to help players maximize the enjoyment and/or satisfaction they have with that interaction.”

The point is that playing games is satisfying in and of itself. If we aim to overcome the lack of volition and faculty that we’re facing, it follows that our experiences—be they at work, school, or at home—need to be enjoyable and satisfying in their own right. Layering a rewards system over an existing experience doesn’t make us like it any better, it just encourages us to tolerate it.

And yet, game-like rewards systems have become quite popular. From loyalty cards to points systems to badges for achievement, organizations are beginning to see the value of game mechanics applied to everything from software to staff meetings. But while simply pasting game mechanics—the ingredients that make games work—onto an existing system is great for short-term engagement, it will almost certainly lead to diminishing returns down the road. The core experience of an activity matters, and a veneer of gameplay isn’t going to change that.

If deeper engagement and performance are what we seek, we need to change our systems from the inside out. And in places where we can’t, we must pay close attention to the way we apply a game layer to our lives. Because using play to influence behavior is more complicated than we think.

Learning Machines

Human beings are learning machines. Our brains are always hunting for patterns—exploring and experimenting—in order to increase our chance of survival. We learn in order to thrive, and it's our main method of interaction with the world around us. So it's not surprising that learning is often accompanied by enjoyment.

A game, at its core, is a kind of structured learning environment. In games, we learn two important things: new skills and new information. Game designers spend a lot of time thinking about skills in particular, because they are the basic framework of interaction with the game system itself. In the classic Nintendo game *Super Mario Bros.*, learning how to run and jump are skills that are fundamental to completing the game. Much of our engagement comes from the trial and error learning process of running and jumping with abandon, slowly turning clumsiness into precision. Once you've acquired those skills, you're able to move through subsequent levels far more freely. And of course, knowledge of each level—the location of every enemy and reward that lies in wait for you—is the other half of mastering the game.

That Learning Feeling

It's hard to tell *exactly* when we're learning. We have a sense that it's happening, but it's not a conscious process. We encounter something new, turn it over and over in our minds (or hands), and somehow, in the handling, it becomes our own. Mental connections are made, and we now possess something we didn't before. Along the way, while we're not aware of these connections being formed, we are aware of how we *feel* during this process. We feel riveted. We feel as if we're "getting it." We feel a sense of deep satisfaction.

To describe this process, game designer Raph Koster borrowed a wonderful term from the world of science fiction: *grok*. To *grok* something means to understand it so thoroughly that it becomes

a part of you. Our brains love grokking new information, so we feel good when it happens. In fact, neuroscientists have shown that when we figure something out, our brains release a flood of chemicals known as opioids (nature's "pleasure drugs").

Any new skill or nugget of information represents a puzzle to our brains, one we feel compelled to solve. Once we *grok* it though—once it's understood—we need a new reason to stay engaged.

Funnily enough, the bored cashier at the checkout stand probably wasn't bored on her first day. She was swimming in a sea of new policies and processes, rules, and regulations. New behaviors and skills were required, and fast. She had a lot of things to figure out. But somewhere between day one and day thirty, she *grokked* the job. The pattern became clear, and her development slowed. Her boredom is a symptom of an exhausted system—one that is effectively saying, "Nothing else to learn here, just keep doing what you're doing." All that remains for her in terms of motivation is a nominal reward in the form of a weekly paycheck. That's simply not enough. As we'll see later, our volition depends on continued learning and growth.

Who's In Charge Here?

In games, we control the action by making our own decisions. Without our input, most games simply stop. This kind of autonomy is incredibly empowering stuff, and it's something sorely missing from the average person's day. Control represents both the freedom to act and interact with the system, as well as our ability to manipulate the world around us. In the game of basketball, the players each have control of their movements on the court, while they attempt to exert some measure of control on the ball itself. In most cases, the rules of play communicate to players what is and isn't under their control.

One of my favorite examples of autonomy in action is the Montessori method. Entrusted to educate a classroom full of five-year-olds, most of us would begin developing lesson plans.

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With kids that young, structure is key—we need to manage their time and attention. Right?

Not necessarily. According to Maria Montessori, children have a natural way of interacting with the world around them that promotes learning and mastery. It's simple: put a group of kids in a room filled with creative supplies and resources, and get out of the way.

The Montessori method is predicated upon the belief (justified by years of experimental observation) that children are self-directed learners. At Montessori schools, students are free to explore whatever interests them, with the help of a teacher who acts as a guide. The sense of self-directed purpose they feel leads to a locus of internal control, greater engagement in the classroom, and rapid development.

Autonomy and control also play a role in creating a sense of self. We say to ourselves, "This is me, operating in the world, making things happen." When we participate in self-directed activities, we ascribe our own meaning and purpose to them, and can be certain that we're acting of our own volition. Our intentions are driving our behavior.

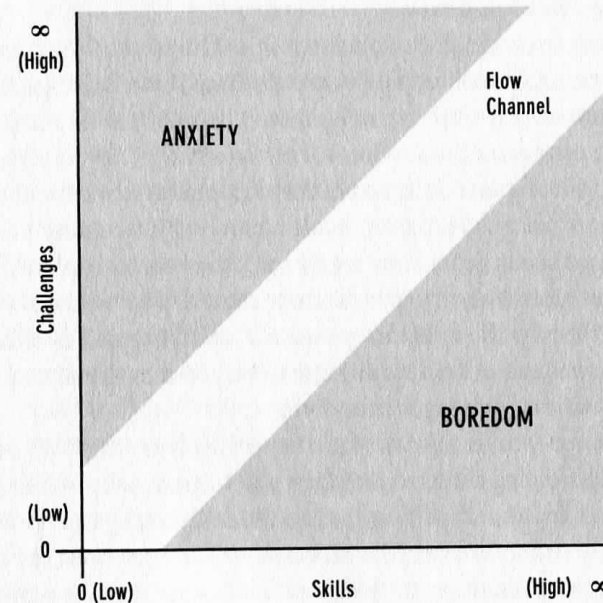
A lack of control in any system creates frustration. Nothing is more bothersome than knowing what to do and not being able (or trusted) to do it. In this way, the granting of control is a kind of validation—an admittance that a person is prepared to be "the hero." When we're making meaningful decisions, our sense of faculty and confidence is increased, and we're forced to think about our goals, which feeds volition.

Good Systems Create Flow

Our inherent attraction to games and the enjoyment they produce is a concept illuminated in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow*. According to him, human beings achieve a state of optimal experience when our skills are continually in balance with the challenges we face. This means that as we progress in any activity, we should be challenged just beyond the level of our abilities. This

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way, we have to grow ever so slightly to succeed. With each burst of growth, we reach ever higher for the next level.



Flow activities induce a state of mind classified by enjoyment, loss of time perception, and a suspension of self. We've all experienced this at some point; perhaps it was during a big presentation at work, on a Jet Ski while on vacation, or while playing an intense video game with friends. We find ourselves so engaged, so in the experience, that we lose track of everything around us. Afterward, we feel an intense sense of exhilaration and accomplishment—a deep satisfaction with ourselves.

When described in these terms, you can begin to see how conducive to flow modern video games really are. Because they are immersive, engaging, and recognize achievement, they're a relatively common gateway into flow for people who are likely not feeling that sensation elsewhere. These games are literally giving players the best learning opportunities they can find.

Great games of all kinds do an excellent job of structuring the

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grokking process. They provide us with what we crave: a set of escalating challenges, feedback on our progress, and the thrill of victory. Systems lacking these elements almost always result in less enjoyable experiences.

With all that said, I don't believe that "the system" is solely to blame here. After all, some people do take low-challenge, low-control situations and turn them into wonderful experiences rich with engagement. You know how they do it? By playing the unlikely role of game designer. If they happen to work the check-out counter as a cashier, they make a game of how many people they can get to smile, or how many sales they can complete in an hour. Every day they try to beat their record, and on days when they do, they up the ante. They *create* a satisfying and escalating challenge instead of waiting for one to be given to them, and this approach literally changes their lives.

So my question is this: why can't everybody do this? Whether you call it creating flow or just plain playfulness, why is this skill set limited to a handful of gifted individuals and game designers? It doesn't have to be. The more we experience flow, the better we get at re-creating it. And each and every time, it reminds us how volition, faculty, and the challenge at hand combine to create balance.

Everyday Heroes

If you study our greatest myths and stories, you'll quickly find yourself discussing the hero's journey. It's a pattern in the plot of many of our most powerful stories and myths that was popularized by mythologist Joseph Campbell. A radical simplification of the hero's journey goes something like this: a "chosen" individual is called to higher purpose, is mentored by a wise elder, embarks on a quest, faces many trials, appears to perish but is reborn, confronts his nemesis, and emerges victorious. Sound familiar? It's a narrative structure that shows up everywhere: *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Ender's Game*, *The Matrix*, and the story of Jesus Christ, to name a few.

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One of the reasons that we love games is because they instantly place us on our own hero's journey, and from the comfort (and safety) of our living room. There's something tremendously satisfying about playing out an archetypal struggle in which each of us, for the duration of the game at least, is the chosen one. Unlike so many other settings where seemingly meaningless and repetitive tasks frustrate us, in games we are at one with our story. With the weight of the game world on our shoulders, we go about the business of saving the world from zombies, the princess from the evil sorcerer, our sports team from longtime rivals, or our fellow soldiers from enemy fire. Being part of a story, and one in which we know we're expected to prevail, plays to our sense of volition and faculty beautifully. We come to desire the victory that the story presupposes, and we simply *must* find a way to win.

I wholeheartedly believe that we can transform our everyday experiences into a billion heroes' journeys, and that we can do so without an Xbox. To achieve that—to bring enjoyment to the most frustrating of circumstances (and democratize the process of creating flow), we'll need a whole new tool kit, and an understanding of games and play that goes far beyond pressing buttons.

What Lies Ahead

This book is divided into ten levels. With each turn of the page you'll progress toward a deeper understanding of games and play—ultimately learning how to design game-like experiences for yourself. Level One (which you've just completed) examined the issues of volition and faculty and suggested that games have lessons to teach us about realizing our potential. Level Two considers the rise of interactive technology and the state of games today. Level Three explores the somewhat misunderstood concept of play. Level Four offers a deeper look at games: how we define them, why we love them, and how they make us better. Level Five contemplates a possible future for games and the technology that will drive them. Level Six outlines the potential problems presented by a future filled with games. Level Seven